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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001357

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AF/S FOR B. NEULING
SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ZI](#) [MDC](#)
SUBJECT: TSVANGIRAI WALKS TO PROVE RELEVANCY, TEST WATERS

REF: A. REF A: HARARE 1356

[1](#)B. REF B: HARARE 1181

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell for reasons 1.5 b/d

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary. For the past two weeks MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai has walked the 16-kilometer roundtrip journey to

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and from work as a means to highlight the failure of the GOZ's economic policies and to demonstrate solidarity with average Zimbabweans struggling to cope with the pressing fuel shortage (ref A). Tsvangirai's walks have garnered moderate amounts of popular support and media attention, and have prompted some MDC MPs to lead similar, periodic walks in their constituencies. The challenge for the MDC, however, will be to disburse this form of protest outside of Tsvangirai's middle-class neighborhood and to have it take

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root in Harare's high-density suburbs and other parts of Zimbabwe. End Summary.

These Boots Are Made For Walkin,

[¶](#)2. (C) Tsvangirai on September 16 began walking the 16-kilometer roundtrip distance from his suburban home to his office in downtown Harare, saying that he) like many of Harare's other residents) was unable to find fuel for the daily commute. An MDC press release issued September 15 said that Tsvangirai had been unable to secure fuel for the past month and had resorted to asking friends and supporters for gasoline. MDC Communications Director Maxwell Zimuto told poloff on September 27 that Tsvangirai instigated the walks as a way to show solidarity with Zimbabweans suffering from the GOZ's economic mismanagement. On the first day of his walk, Tsvangirai told reporters that the hour and 15 minute walk was a &nasty experience8 and questioned how people coped with the situation.

[¶](#)3. (C) The walks have garnered modest amounts of public support with Zimuto reporting that more than 100 followers accompanied Tsvangirai on September 23. Numbers, however, vary daily and at differing points along the route; MDC Director for Presidential Affairs Gandi Mudzingwa told poloff on September 28 that approximately 50 MDC officials accompanied Tsvangirai on Tuesday morning and that about 20 joined on Wednesday morning. Several MDC MPs, including Trudy Stevenson and Tendai Biti, have also joined Tsvangirai on various days of the walk. Mudzingwa said the MDC had decided not to invite the public to participate and to have only its leaders march as a way to set the example.

[¶](#)4. (C) Other opposition MPs have staged walks in their own constituencies to highlight the fuel shortages and show solidarity with average Zimbabweans. According to Zimuto, the MPs for Harare Central, Mabvuku-Tafara, and Mufakose) all in Harare Province - last week walked their daily commute. Mudzingwa said that the MP for Highfield walked on September 28 with about 13 followers. Mudzingwa and Zimuto both reported that other MDC politicians were expected to take up periodic walks.

[¶](#)5. (C) The GOZ's response to the walks has been fairly muted. Predictably, GOZ officials and state-controlled media have discounted the walks as a &cheap publicity stunt8 and even claimed that Tsvangirai actually drove most of the way in a gas-guzzling truck. Meanwhile, Mudzingwa said that the police have not interfered with Tsvangirai's walks, although officers have been periodically present along the route.

Comment

[¶](#)6. (C) Coming on the heels of three no profile demonstrations against constitutional reform (ref B), Tsvangirai's walks are a step forward in the opposition's

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ability to garner public attention and capitalize on a key wedge issue) Zimbabwe's pressing lack of fuel.
Tsvangarai's walks are a significant sign of life from the

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party that has been on the defensive since the March Parliamentary election. Nonetheless, these walks are probably too little too late. Zimbabwe has been virtually without fuel for anyone without access to foreign exchange for several months, forcing many people to walk great distances from their residences to their jobs. The impact of Tsvangarai's recent walks from his middle-class neighborhood

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appear to be lost on the vast majority of Harare's poorer residents who live in high-density suburbs and have faced long queues, periodic gas shortages, commuter bus fares hikes, and long walks for the past several years.

Tsvangirai's walks also highlight the MDC's failure to

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launch an effective media campaign; coverage in the independent media has been largely confined to photographs with brief captions.

¶7. (C) Tsvangarai, however, treads a fine line on these walks. The MDC has gone to great lengths not to call these events demonstrations and to reduce public participation in the walks for fear of a government backlash and Tsvangarai's possible arrest for failure to obtain permission for holding "public meetings." The GOZ, for its part, appears ready to tolerate favor the status quo of relatively modest numbers and limited media attention. Were the MDC able to significantly expand the profile of these walks, the GOZ would be forced to decide between allowing the protests to continue, and thus gain strength, or clamp down and consequently bring more media and international attention to the MDC.

DELL